

## **CMU BACKTRACKS ON CHARTER SCHOOLS NEW STATE RULES LIMIT NUMBERS, UNIVERSITY SAYS**

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### **Body**

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Kendra Tobes put off getting a full-time job for 18 months to develop a charter public school in Oakland County for children with learning disabilities.

Nagi Musleh spent \$32,000 of his own to fund his dream of creating a charter public high school in western Wayne County to train students to work in international business.

This week, both learned that Central Michigan University -- after giving them the initial go-ahead -- will no longer back their efforts to join the new breed of independent public schools.

"It's a disaster. It's one of many political disasters in our public education system," Musleh said Friday.

Tobes' sentiments were much the same: "We really were a grassroots organization. We really did embody the spirit of the charter school law."

CMU said Friday that it was pulling the plug on eight schools that had passed the first hurdle to become charter schools. Most were among 31 that were told by CMU last April they would be chartered as public schools as soon as they found buildings and negotiated contracts.

But because of limitations enacted by the Legislature in December, CMU said Friday it had to be more selective in approving charters.

"We're not permanently shutting the door on any school, but we're placed in a position where we have to be extremely cautious about using up our contracts," said Bob Mills, director of CMU's charter school office.

"But I think this legislation was designed to send a message to CMU, and we can live with that."

The eight schools that must start over in seeking their charters are:

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- \* Academy for Business and International Studies in Inkster.
- \* Detroit Academy of Arts & Sciences in Detroit.
- \* Educational Options Academy in St. Joseph.
- \* Great Lakes Academy in Saginaw.
- \* Liberty Charter School in Kalamazoo.
- \* North Star Academy in Southfield.
- \* New Horizons Academy in Highland Park.
- \* Applied Technology Academy in Taylor.

CMU has been the leader, by far, in chartering schools, having approved 28 of the 40 operating.

But that pace also earned CMU the label of being a charter school factory that was churning out charters to help Gov. John Engler meet his goal of having 200 of the schools by 1996.

Largely in response to that, the Legislature began restricting the number of charters that could be issued. When the initial legislation was passed, there were no limits. Later, the Legislature decided the state's 15 public universities could issue, together, a total of 75 charters. Community colleges each can authorize one charter school, and local and intermediate public school districts can authorize as many as they like.

In December, the Legislature prohibited any of the 15 public universities from chartering more than half of all the schools they are allowed.

This year, taken together, universities can issue 85 charters. In 1997, the cap increases to 100 and rises to 150 by 2000.

That means CMU is limited to 50 charters through 1997. But the university already had told 46 applicants they could expect to become chartered and had granted 31 charters. Twenty- eight schools are operating and three others are due to open this year.

Mills said he hoped the new rules would entice other eligible agencies to get more involved in chartering schools.

"It will be good for CMU," he said. "It will give us a chance to catch our breath and improve our oversight and our process."

But the slowdown also is costly for the university. CMU has spent about \$1 million to develop and run its charter school office. The university collects a 3 percent fee from the schools it charters for each child enrolled -- money that is expected to cover the cost of the office.

In Southfield, Kendra Tobes said she had no warning that CMU was about to strip her North Star Academy of its initial approval.

"We had nothing, no correspondence from them," Tobes said. "It was quite a slap in the face to us."

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Although Tobes never received a charter, she opened her school for children with learning disabilities and attention- deficit problems in September as a private school with \$11,000 annual tuition.

"Our tuition is exorbitant and we know it, but we had no choice if we wanted to open the school," she said.

Musleh's Academy for Business and International Studies, which was to have been a 200-student high school, hasn't been so lucky.

The Michigan Partnership for New Education -- the organization that has a contract with the State Board of Education to assist charter schools -- rejected Musleh's request for a loan, he said.

"We could have started in June 1996," Musleh said. "We were almost there."

But Musleh pledged to continue efforts to obtain a charter. "We're going to put a lot of pressure on CMU. We worked so hard. We're not going to let anybody makes us go away," he said.

## Graphic

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Photo WILLIAM ARCHIE, Detroit Free Press;

Kendra Tobes helps Casha Sheppard, 11, with a test at Southfield's North Star Academy, a private school vying for charter school status.

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